

## Creativity in Higher Education: The Impact of Classroom Debate on the Academic Performance of Administrative Science Students

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### Abstract

*Classroom debate has been widely used as a learning method especially at the secondary and tertiary level. Classroom debate enhances self-confidence, critical thinking, analytical capabilities, communication skills, and teamwork. Although studies involving the impact of classroom debate has vastly been done in the context of learning the second language, psychology, philosophy, and pure science; specific studies that focus on administrative science field are still scarce. Administrative science subjects are multidisciplinary, critical and analytical, and mostly it covers aspects of administrative concepts, management principles and practices, administrative and management theories, public sector management, and international relations. Classroom debate are beneficial and relevant to be applied in administrative science subjects as a properly orchestrated debate can allow students to exert fresh ideas and develop reasoning skills that can improve their academic performance. Therefore, this paper aims to establish a conceptual review on the impact of classroom debate on students' academic performance within the context of higher education, particularly in the administrative science field. A conceptual framework is subsequently proposed linking the benefits of classroom debate with students' academic performance.*

Keywords: *learning, debate, higher education, academic performance*

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### INTRODUCTION

Creativity is the 'tendency to generate or recognize ideas, alternatives, or possibilities that may be useful in solving problems, communicating with others, and entertaining ourselves and others' (Franken, 1994, p. 396). It is the ability to exceed conventional ideas, systems, patterns, associations, or the like, and to create meaningful new ideas and knowledge using human's senses and ability to judge. Creativity is the art of being out of the ordinary, using both intuition and intelligence and producing an outcome the best that can be. In education, being creative is a 'must have' trait to educators. So much of teaching is now driven by data (i.e., test scores) and dictated by "best practices" that teachers are losing confidence in their own creativity (Bunting, 2006). Breaking the barrier between educators and learners could be the first step in indulging creativity into education. Teaching at tertiary level forces lecturers to be more in touch with the learners rather than just giving lecture. Educators must be flexible in

accepting ideas and enhancing the subjects to talk and convey opinions (Collard & Looney, 2014).

Lecturers benefit from going back to their own beginnings and thinking about why they wanted to teach. What goals do they expect to accomplish? What fulfilment do they anticipate? In developing lesson plans, lecturers should be able to figure out how the lesson plans can affect their students for the rest of the semester. Thus, lecturers must be able to 'prepare creativity' beforehand. Alternative resources such as audio-video materials, creative delivery via technology, interactive presentations and such, must be appropriately arranged. In order to implement this, lecturers themselves must not restrain their minds from 'wild' and unusual ideas.

## **DEBATE AS A FORM OF CREATIVE LEARNING**

One of the methods that can be used to foster creativity in learning is through classroom debates. Debating has a rich history; it encourages students' advocacy and expression through interscholastic debate. Debate is a part of rivalry that comprise two teams, the affirmative team upholding the resolutions and the negative team standing in opposition (Noonan, 2011). Debate is a formal technique of argument in which it directly allows interaction and representation. Debate includes a sense of manipulation and in each argument; there is a form of persuasion injected in it. Persuasion often appeals to audience emotional responses and will determine how they will react and interact to the motion. Debate has been viewed as a form of teaching-learning strategy that presumes an established position, for or against, on a matter or an issue, or solution to a problem.

Although there are extant studies done on the benefits of debates, studies that link debates with improved academic performance are still scarce (Omeliicheva & Avdeyeva, 2008; Onen, 2016). Therefore, considering the numerous benefits that debating has towards students' performance, this paper aims to review the impact of debate on the academic performance among students. It explores five (6) variables namely interpretation skills, inferential skills, and analytical skills.

Debate imposes active learning surroundings and it stimulates team collaboration through persuasive evidence (Doody & Condon, 2012). Warner & Brusckie (2001) highlighted that classroom debates are able to improve students' performance as debate exercises encourage active engagement among learners. A study done by Catterall (2002) professed that students who actively engage in debate activities has 25% wider range of academic skills as compared to their peers who do not. As debate activities encourage competition, students are more driven to learn more on their subject matter to ensure that they have confidence in defending their arguments. Students who are involved in debate activities are able to improve their written skills,

oral communications, and also will greatly improve their reading comprehensions compare to their peers who do not. Colbert and Biggers (1985) are among the earliest to assert the healthy benefits of debate exercises. They claimed that debating students were more comfortable with new concepts and unfamiliar language, and had the ability to gain wider access to new information such as college-level philosophy, history, public policy and current events (as cited in Carr, 2002). Due to the development of listening skills, tactical skills, and self-confidence during debate activities, most debating students tend to pursue leadership positions in their schools and communities, and they often take on strong leadership role within their teams (Bradley, 1959).

## **HOW DOES DEBATE BENEFIT ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCE STUDENTS?**

Administrative science is a study of governance, public administration, and management. It focuses on strategic management, people management and technology management, often in the context of public sector (Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies Official Website, 2014). Administrative science subjects are naturally comprehensive and industry related. More often than not, the administrative science field requires its learners to comprehend national issues through discussions and dialogues.

It is evident that debate exercises help in generating and reinforce many skills related to the field of administrative science. Duncan (2012) professed that debate nurtures various abilities needed by students such as effective written and oral communication, critical thinking, working in a collaborative environment, and civic awareness and participation. All these skills are necessary for social science students (particularly administrative science) as the field requires frequent reading and it stretches students' thinking and creative skills.

Social sciences in a broader sense, is a study about humanity and how people behave and influence the world around us ([www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)). There are broad range of disciplines that social science covers which includes administration, demography, environmental planning, economics, management and business studies, education, linguistics, law, politics, international relations, and many others. All these disciplines are very much helpful in stimulating the ability to think beyond experience since it makes students think and analyze critically. The nature of this field totally suits the need to exercise classroom debate, particularly for administrative science students, as the nature of debate activities help sharpen rhetorical skills in a fast paced environment, enriching their ability to problem solve and engage in autonomous learning (Anderson & Mezuk, 2012).

Moreover, debate activities will assist students to explore various connections between the social, political, and environmental dimensions of society (Bellon, 2000). An investigation done by Mezuk (2009) revealed that students who involved in debate

activities were more likely to graduate and had significantly higher scores in English and reading subjects, but not Mathematics or Science. It shows that, debate is effective for students' enhancement as it helps to improve their academic performance by fostering students' thinking and reading ability. Catterall (2002) asserted that students who participate in debate often excel in written and oral communication and significantly develop their reading comprehension skills 25% more than their peers. All these skills will encourage students to become more comfortable with new concepts and unfamiliar language, and gain access to wider scopes of new information such as college-level philosophy, history, public policy and current events (Carr, 2002). Previous studies done by Billman and Christensen (2008) illustrated that most debaters consistently receive impressive grades throughout high school and college. On average, debaters have a GPA of 3.75 (often higher), and most of them led their class, usually by being in the top 10% above other students.

## DEBATING SKILLS THAT IMPACT STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE

Doody and Condon (2012) suggested six skills necessary for debate. These skills are; interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. *Interpretation* skill is the ability of students to identify and clarify underlying issues in discussion, *analysis* is the ability to gather and organize information, and *evaluation* is the ability of students to value information in terms of its accuracy, applicability, and differences of multiple viewpoints. Meanwhile, *inference* refers to students' capability to conclude issues, interpreting values, and conveying viewpoints. *Explanation* refers to students' logical elucidations on an issue, and *self-regulation* is the ability to appraise and critic others' performance while contributing to the team. For the purpose of this paper, three out of these six skills will be discussed. The skills are interpretation skills, analytical skills, and inferential skills. These skills will be explained in the following sections.

### *Interpretation Skills*

Interpretation skills are the skills used to interpret or explain the significance of a message, issue or information. Tilus (2012) referred to interpretation skills as one's ability to understand given information and communicate the meaning of that information to others. Through classroom debate, students are required to be actively involved in information interpretation through discussion and reasoning activities (Collard & Looney, 2014). Besides that, students are trained to develop competencies in researching current issue, prepare logical arguments, listen actively to various opinions, differentiate between subjective and evidence-based information, and integrate relevant information (Darby, 2007). Student debaters are persuaded to be reflective in interpreting an issue in a debate exercise. Debate nurtures student's ability to interpret an issue critically to provide reasons and share viewpoints (Tumposky, 2004). In

learning a specific content, students are encouraged to transport and demonstrate their thoughts in the most convincing manner while sharpening their persuasion skills and shaping their ideas to be well conveyed and accepted.

### ***Analytical Skills***

Other skills that help impact students' performance are analytical skills. Analytical skills represent students' ability to connect ideas and scrutinize the relevance of the ideas. The degree to which a debate program enhances the analytical ability of its participants is a crucial criterion against which to weigh the debate program. Many authors note that the demands of a changing world require students to analyse and evaluate ideas, and these skills are available in debating exercises (see Doody & Condon, 2012, Omelicheva & Avdeydeva, 2008). The ability to think critically is especially critical in a world overflowing with information. According to Bellon (2000), critical thinking among student can be created and shaped if this group of students is given chances to 'think' among their peers. Students will gain experience involving reasoning process through a thorough thinking process that indirectly foster critical thinking. This is in line with an earlier study done by Mike, Berkowitz, Hunt and Loudon (1999) who revealed that participation in debate activities increased students' ability to reason and justify matters pertinent to their subject areas. Critical thinking ability important as it enforces students to think rigorously in the attempt to build linkages between words and ideas that make concepts more meaningful (Bellon, 2000; Tous & Haghighi, 2016).

### ***Inferential Skills***

Inferential skills are 'the ability to construct a procedure that will result in the successful identification of an invariant, based on repeated exposure to exemplars and non-exemplars where response is followed by feedback' (Shafrir, Siegel, & Chee, 1990, p. 506). Students who have high ability to infer are able to identify issues or conflict, and may apply solutions based on critical incidents (Doody & Condon, 2012). As debate activities require students to actively listen to others' reasoning and arguments, students are trained to weigh and compare arguments from multiple perspectives, before they can come up with their own point of views (Omelicheva & Avdeydeva, 2008). This way, students are stimulated to be attentive to details and they will be exercising multiple skills at once; listening, communication (verbal and non-verbal), and critical thinking (Onen, 2016).

Inferential skills will enhance students' ability to conclude an issue. In group discussions, inferential skills are important as it helps students make judgments and conclusions (Doody & Condon, 2012).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Based on the afore-mentioned review of the literature and consistent with the significant roles of debate and students' academic performance (Onen, 2016; Doody & Condon, 2012; Omelicheva & Avdeydeva, 2008), our proposed framework is depicted in Figure 1. Interpretation skills, analytical skills, and inferential skills are viewed as possible predictors of students' academic performance.

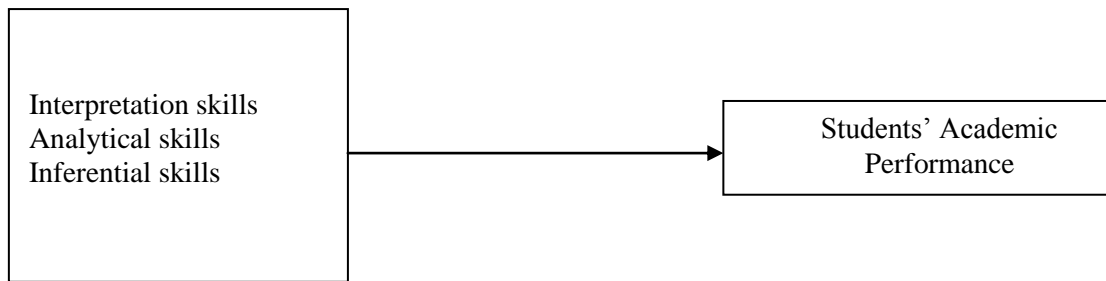


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

Based on the above framework, we proposed that:

1. Interpretation skills are significantly related to students' academic performance
2. Analytical skills are significantly related to students' academic performance
3. Inferential skills are significantly related to students' academic performance

## CONCLUSION

Debate exercises help develop students' confidence and creativity. Through proper monitoring, debate activities may enhance students' learning environment as debate requires students to be alert towards others' arguments and defence. No doubt, debate is a good platform to cultivate creativity. It brings out the competence and confidence in students especially using their interpretation skills, analytical skills, and inferential skills. All these skills are also beneficial to students as they go into the working environment once they graduated.

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